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Towards a new definition of professionalism for college leaders: a Scottish perspective

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Abstract

In 1993, colleges in Scotland became independent corporate bodies, funded directly by central government. This article is a review of the evolution of college management practice within the context of the political reform of the public services and recent educational policy developments in Scotland. It is an analysis of a complex and continuous process of structural and political change that has revolutionised the role of college leaders. Public and political interest in moving towards 'world class' institutions has created a context for a new discourse of professionalism in the leadership and management of colleges. In this article we present a new and more comprehensive definition of professionalism, which offers a sharp contrast with the older public service ethic and with the simple rhetoric of managerialism. It is proposed that professionalism in further education management should, in future, be defined in terms of four inter-related dimensions. It is further suggested that the concept of professionalism should be embraced, emphasising the ability to create a value base and an institutional culture which locates management, not above and in isolation from other staff, but as part of a network of professional expertise that has, at its core, a focus upon the complexity of the needs, values and expectations of lifelong learners.

Keywords

College leadership, college management practices, professionalism and professionalism

Introduction

In 1993, under the Further and Higher Education Act 1992, colleges in Scotland were removed from the control of local authorities and became independent corporate bodies, funded directly by central government. The changes in the legal and financial status of colleges led to radical developments in governance and management and, 15 years later, the quality of management and leadership of colleges continues to be of public and political interest. A clear example is that four high-profile financial and legal crises in individual institutions resulted in interventions by the Scottish Funding Council (SFC, 2006a, 2007a)¹ and in hearings before the Audit Committee of the Scottish Parliament (Scottish Parliament, 2001, 2006).

The Scottish Funding Council, in its Corporate Plan for 2006 – 9 (SFC, 2006b), aims to work towards 'world-class' organisations. The Council explicitly recognises that colleges are now major enterprises in their own right that require the highest quality leadership and management. This interest in leadership and management competence in what is recognised as a complex operating environment for colleges represents the latest phase in the turbulent evolution of management practice in Scottish colleges since their incorporation in 1993.

This article is a review of the development of college management practice within the context of the political reform of the public services in general. In it we examine the theoretical conceptions of managerialism and the emergence of a new professional discourse for college leaders. We conclude by presenting a new and more comprehensive definition of professionalism in leadership and management in Scotland's Colleges which moves beyond what can be considered as the now outdated public service ethos and beyond the simplistic rhetoric of managerialism. The theoretical position and the conclusions are based on the critical reflection of one of the authors who has 18 years' senior managerial experience in tertiary education, and are further informed by their doctoral research which was supervised by the other author (see Lowe, 2005).

Public sector reform

The majority of the current 43 colleges in Scotland were established during the middle part of the twentieth century

and, up until the 1980s, the sector experienced almost complete political invisibility. With the election of the Thatcher government in 1979, however, colleges were caught up in a national process of reform that began with more generic ideological questioning of the rationale for public services and of the role of the state in their provision. This ideology informed policy objectives to reduce the cost of public services and to improve their quality through greater responsiveness. Although prepared to invest more heavily in public services, the Blair government tended to maintain the same emphasis on economy, efficiency and customer service (Birch & Holliday, 2000). The Blair government and the new Scottish Executive also encouraged a push towards collaboration and 'joined-up' government rather than market-driven competition. At the same time, they created a new focus on accountability and standards of governance and management (Scottish Executive, 1999).

One of the principal drivers of this continuing process of reform has been a shift in focus towards the organisation (or institution) being the key agent for the delivery of the service rather than the local authority, government agency or individual professional (Hill, 1993; Gamble, 1994). This centrality of the institution in policy implementation explains the 'rise and rise' of education management as a field in recent years (Simkins, 1999). It has certainly had a profound effect on educational management in general and on colleges in particular. To understand current perspectives on college leadership, it is helpful to analyse its development within this political context.

From invisibility to independence

Prior to 1990 colleges were an integral part of local government's education service. The Self-Governing Schools etc. (Scotland) Act 1989 began the process of devolution of authority from local government to the institutional level. Local authorities were required by the 1989 Act to implement schemes of delegation giving the new college councils, and therefore principals,² additional powers relating to management and financial control. Under the Further and Higher Education Act 1992, colleges were given full financial independence, together with full powers to own assets, employ staff, enter into contracts and determine the supply of services. It was a statutory requirement, under the 1992 Act, that a majority of the members of the new boards of management were drawn from business, commerce and the professions. The overall motivation was to establish a more business-like approach to governance.

With incorporation came a second significant associated change. The 1992 Act transferred the statutory duty to provide adequate further education from local authorities to the Secretary of State for Scotland. The Scottish Office now provided funding directly to individual colleges and was therefore able to introduce specific funding regimes that incentivised efficiency and cost reduction. We discuss this issue in more detail later in the paper.

A third important change was brought about by college principals themselves who came to realise that the new task of efficient management required control over the key costs

and resources (especially staffing). In the face of intransigent opposition to changes in the terms and conditions of service from the teaching staff trade unions (the Education Institute of Scotland (EIS) and the Scottish Further and Higher Education Association (SFHEA)) the colleges withdrew from national bargaining and established local pay bargaining mechanisms. It is arguable that these changes irrevocably altered the relationship between principals and professional lecturing staff.

As a result of all of these developments, the role of college principal was transformed from a professional academic (usually under benign governance) into the chief executive of a quasi-private enterprise in a new and highly competitive market. Some principals welcomed their new freedom from local authority control. They had embraced the opportunity for educational innovation offered by the national reform of the post-16 curriculum (Scottish Education Department, 1983) and were keen to assume the new powers to develop the role of their institutions, for example by borrowing funds for capital investments or by offering services across local authority boundaries. The role of principal was, however, also made more challenging since some elements of the workforce in colleges were hostile towards change. Our contention is that the exigencies of grappling with their new responsibilities and fighting for financial viability left principals little scope to reflect upon the impact of the changes on their professional identity. This issue re-emerged some years later. In the meantime, the new experiences of college leaders unfolded within the context of the managerialist ideology within which most of the UK public sector was operating.

Managerialism in the public sector and in colleges

The ideology of managerialism was located within the Conservative government's belief that efficient management within a competitive environment was the key to reforming the public services (Newman & Clarke, 1994). Pollitt (1993) argues that two main strands of management thinking inform this perspective. The first is neo-Taylorism which advocates a rational model of management, devoted to the analysis of inputs and outputs and committed to maximising productivity through the efficient use of resources (particularly human). Pollitt (1993) further suggests that this form of managerialism can be translated into a set of management techniques which include strict financial management, an emphasis on productivity, the use of quantitative performance indicators, consumerism and the discipline of the market. Central to this environment is the creation of a disciplined, flexible workforce and the assertion of managers' right to manage. Hartley (1990) asserts that Taylorism was born in an industrial context and its application to public services provided by professionals should have been expected to lead to controversy, especially in education.

Another strand of influential thinking which underpinned managerialism is primarily concerned with culture change in organisations. Newman & Clarke (1994) refer to this as 'new managerialism' or 'new wave management'. This model

encompasses an approach which is people-centred and promotes looser systems of control, advocating that managers should inspire and empower people who will then strive for quality and excellence through intrinsic motivation. Although this strand of thinking was originally developed in the private sector, at a superficial level it appears to have the potential to be more compatible with some public services.

By the 1990s, the term New Public Management (NPM) was used to synthesise a number of these strands within management thinking. Ferlie et al. (1996) attempted to identify four ideal types of NPM characterised by a drive for efficiency, downsizing and decentralisation, culture change and accountability to service users.

The brief theoretical review above helps to illustrate the range of potential responses to the policy of reform and reconstruction. In practice, different areas of the public sector absorbed and adapted managerialism in different ways depending on their circumstances and values and on the extent to which they were subject to direct government intervention (Gamble, 1994). We next consider the extent to which the college sector and individual institutional leaders adopted a managerialist ideology.

In Scotland the reform of colleges was characterised by a punishing drive towards efficiency, through incentivising individual institutions to compete for government funding and to secure other funds by finding new markets (Gallacher, 2003). The methodology that the Scottish Office devised for allocating resources rewarded above-average growth in levels of student activity during a period when the amount available for distribution was being reduced in real terms. Colleges competed aggressively for above-average growth, consigning those who achieved average or below-average growth to cuts or 'efficiency gains' (McTavish, 2003). In less than four years the sector as a whole delivered 'efficiency gains' of around 30 per cent in cash terms, which placed immense pressure on resource management. During the same period, colleges were also expected to demonstrate a commitment to quality for service users through HMI inspections, acquisition of kitemarks such as ISO 9001 and quality improvement strategies linked to performance indicators for retention and achievement.

It is conceivable that senior managers lost a sense of themselves as professional teachers or as professional public servants. In particular they lost professional commonality with lecturing staff who labelled them as 'management'. Writing about England, Randle & Brady (1997) contrast a 'professional paradigm' with a 'managerial paradigm', attributing the former to lecturers and the latter to the colleges' senior managers. Elliot & Crossley (1997) similarly identified a dichotomy between a pervasive market ideology implemented by senior managers who seemed to embrace a managerialist culture, and a competing ideology sustained by lecturing staff which was underpinned by a commitment to a more orthodox academic and pedagogic culture. In Scotland, tensions were heightened by the withdrawal of colleges from national pay bargaining. This polarisation may partially have helped to create the context for college leaders to redefine their own professionalism.

Ainley & Bailey (1997) paint a more complex picture. In a case study of two English colleges, they interviewed managers, lecturing staff and students. Despite apparent external pressure to adopt managerialist practices, the principals understood that the transformational change needed to create a stable future also required a balancing of private sector practice with public sector values. Ainley & Bailey comment: 'Principals and their SMTs hoped that, by astute management, they could reconcile running the corporate college more efficiently and the values of the service ethic they and their staffs espoused' (p. 74).

However, Ainley & Bailey (1997) also documented a growing chasm between management and lecturing staff. Despite widespread restructurings designed to create flatter, less bureaucratic organisations borrowed from private sector models, management was perceived as detached from the workforce, as a new and distinct occupational group. Many main grade lecturers disagreed with management's estimation, confirmed by Ainley & Bailey (1997), that quality had been improved or at least maintained.

During the turbulent transition of colleges to independent corporations, principals and their colleagues had to learn 'on the job' how to work within an externally imposed managerialist ideology and how to deal with the often conflicting expectations of government and of their professional staff. We contend that they had little option but to respond individually depending upon their personal skills, experience and values. Arguably, this was a climate in which considerable experiential personal development took place and there were many positive experiences for those who relished the opportunity to import the best of private sector practice into their organisations. The sector in Scotland became more heterogeneous and colleges developed different missions and strategies (McTavish, 2006). Perhaps the most significant legacy of this early managerialism was to cause college leaders to perceive the need for their professional development, at that time, primarily in terms of the acquisition of the generic management skills necessary to run an organisation.

Developments post-1997

The policy of the incoming Labour government in 1997 and the post-devolution Scottish Executive in 1999 towards the public sector in general and towards education in particular reflected both continuity and change. There was continuity in respect of expectations of efficiency, value for money and quality of service. To this was added a new emphasis on partnership within the public services and on ethical standards in public life (Scottish Executive, 1999).

In Scotland, the college sector benefited from significant increases in resources. The Comprehensive Spending Review delivered additional funding of 50 per cent over the life of the first Scottish Parliament (Scottish Executive, 2001). By 2007–8, total investment, including capital investment, in the college sector was almost £620 million. The sector has gained greater visibility and influence and it has been

recognised as a significant contributor to the new policy agendas of lifelong learning, skills and social inclusion. The Scottish Executive's first major policy statement on lifelong learning gave colleges a key role in measures to tackle youth unemployment, social inclusion, adult literacy and skills for a modern economy (Scottish Executive, 2003). This enhanced role is confirmed in the incoming Scottish National Party (SNP) government's first policy statement on tertiary education (Scottish Government, 2007). There is an expectation that colleges will provide high-quality, flexible, student-responsive and community-responsive services, and the emergence of colleges as providers of higher education is recognised (Lowe, 2005). The encouragement to collaborate rather than to compete resulted in a proliferation of joint projects often incentivised by funding from the Scottish Funding Council. By 2007 there were also three full-scale college mergers. Many colleges, however, have learned to compete successfully in new markets for overseas students, for higher education and for commercial contracts which add significant value to the portfolio of the institution (SFC, 2007b). A mixed economy of collaborative publicly-funded lifelong learning and more competitive market-driven activity has thus developed and is likely to continue, offering the opportunity to develop a range of positive leadership and management practices.

Following incorporation, there has been a significant turnover of senior staff in colleges. Our own analysis suggests that by early 2009, in Scotland, less than 15 per cent of principals had over 15 years' service (and this figure will be further reduced by imminent staff changes). The majority of the principals that are now in post began managing colleges after incorporation and did not experience the transition as leaders. As a consequence they may be better able to begin to define their professional identity within a generally positive political and financial context. We observe that college leaders have begun, both individually and collectively through Scotland's Colleges³ to reflect on their role within a modernised public sector so that they can engage actively with policy implementation as professionals rather than simply reacting to its impact. We argue that the initial phase of emphasis on the narrow, practical, managerial aspects of incorporation is complete for most colleges, given that, by 2005–6, all but two had met the SFC's criteria for financial stability.⁴ There is now evidence of a shift towards a broader focus on the quality of leadership of independent colleges. This raises the interesting question of whether and how the concept of professionalism should inform and influence the development of college management.

An occupation or a profession?

Traditional claims to professionalism have been based on autonomy, status, public esteem, specialist knowledge and a fiduciary relationship with clients (Freidson, 1994; Esland, 1980). These traditional criteria are potentially unhelpful to newer occupational groups, in that they are based on self-definition by the established professions. In

particular, the criteria presuppose a client/professional relationship which only indirectly applies to managers.

A second notable theoretical view is 'professionalisation'. Johnson (1972) describes the historical sequence of events through which professionalising occupations pass, including the establishment of a training school, the founding of a professional association, action to secure protection by law and adoption of a formal code. We note that this sequence has been subjected to critique on the basis that historical analysis demonstrates widely differing patterns of professionalisation at different times and in different cultural contexts. There is, however, some evidence of a professionalisation process taking place both in public sector management generally and within management in the college sector.

Within the public sector in Scotland, for example, the Scottish Executive led the establishment of the Scottish Leadership Foundation (SLF, 2004) which served as a focus for bringing together leaders from the civil service, health service, enterprise networks, education and local government to debate standards and values in public life and to underpin cross-sectoral initiatives for the development of world-class leadership. Within the college sector in Scotland the formation of the Principals' Forum within Scotland's Colleges provides opportunities for senior managers to discuss collective responses to policy directives. The forum also serves as an informal professional association. These developments were complemented by the launch of a programme of continuing professional development exclusively for principals badged as 'Leading & Learning', which is part-funded by the Scottish Funding Council (SFC, 2006b). These steps reflect developments within the rest of the United Kingdom. For example, the reform of the college sector in England includes the introduction of a compulsory leadership qualification for college principals (DfES, 2006). On balance, we would argue that these initiatives do not represent an attempt to establish traditional professional status for public sector managers. For college principals professionalisation is an initially unacknowledged consequence of the new role of management in organisations tasked with delivering education in a modern public service environment.

Professionalism rather than professionalism

We argue that the acquisition of specific skills, competences and leadership capability, although essential to the successful management of colleges, has only partially resolved the dilemma of defining a new professional role for college leaders. Incorporation and independence have not only affected the functions of management. This change in legal status has also led to irrevocable changes in the relationships that senior managers have with government, with staff, with students and with other clients and funders. We contend, therefore, that central to the development of a clearer professional definition is the creation of a new framework of professional values and that, in particular, these values will need to incorporate appropriate

networks of interaction with stakeholders and other professional groups.

The approach advanced by Nixon et al. (1997) is therefore helpful in providing a new framework for professionalism for college managers. Although the work is primarily directed towards school-level teaching, the framework is applicable to college management. Nixon et al. (1997) advocate a move away from 'professionalism' as the ideology of service and specialist expertise and away from 'professionalisation' where the status of the occupation is at stake, towards what may be termed as 'professionality'. Professionality focuses on the quality of practice in situations where power and authority have become more complex and where organisational culture and values have replaced traditional organisational constructs based on hierarchy and bureaucracy. The approach advocated by Nixon et al. (1997) is based first on a theory of 'difference', defined as the way in which social or professional groups distinguish themselves through their values, perspectives and vested interests; and second, on 'agreement', which is defined as a process of accommodating and integrating these different perspectives to achieve organisational or professional goals in new ways. In this model, management becomes part of a process through which different groups of staff sustain and develop their own professional values through developing new ways to respond to the conflicting and changing demands of students, clients and stakeholders.

We now turn our attention to what this approach could mean for colleges, which have become significant and complex organisations offering a range of public and commercial services. Unlike schools and universities, which have relatively homogeneous student bodies, colleges now provide lifelong learning for a heterogeneous mix of people studying at many different levels and for many different purposes. The educational needs and expectations of these varied groups are diverse and may even conflict. To provide appropriate learning opportunities colleges employ staff with a similarly diverse range of skills and experience. The role of colleges at the heart of local communities also brings them into contact with a diverse range of stakeholders from employers to local authorities and government agencies, all with their own agendas and priorities.

In Nixon et al.'s (1997) model, the professional role of management would be one of negotiation, collaboration and brokerage among all these interest groups and the creation of a value framework which places students at the centre of the decision-making process. One clear example which illustrates these concepts is the new requirement for colleges to provide vocational learning for 14–16 year old pupils who are at risk of under-achievement in schools (Scottish Government, 2005). Managerialism might mean calculating the costs, devising an efficient delivery model and instructing reluctant staff, which we suspect is not likely to result in an optimum learning experience. Success depends, instead, on college managers being able to negotiate with local authority managers, to cooperate with school staff, and to support lecturers and other staff to develop a new professional response for a difficult and

demanding client group who may not be welcomed by other students.

We note that Nixon et al. (1997) deploy Williams's (1977) helpful distinction between 'residual', 'dominant' and 'emergent' cultural elements within organisations. Furthermore, we suggest that in terms of college management, the 'residual' culture is the traditional public service ethic. The 'dominant' culture is the post-incorporation quasi-market model of supply and demand with tension between the professional expectations of teaching staff and the exigencies of a 'customer-driven' and financially sustainable service. The 'emergent' culture is the renewed recognition of the primary importance of learners and of the quality of the learning experience, requiring a new network of relationships among managers and other professional groups and with external stakeholders. In this culture, the professional role of senior college managers is one of contributing to effective learning environments by promoting a student-centred value framework while also recognising the values and priorities of all staff groups and stakeholders. This is particularly relevant in the case of adult learners, who perceive themselves as stakeholders and who need an institutional culture and ethos that is conducive to integration and achievement (West, 1996). We are not simply suggesting a soft form of managerialism. Professionalism for college managers represents a balance between respect for traditional educational values and recognition of the new political context which requires colleges to manage difficult choices and accommodate new constituencies of learners. In the field of education, professionalism is often taken to mean a primary commitment to learning and teaching. We agree with Lumby & Tomlinson (2000) that, in the modern college, no single staff group should be able to claim a monopoly of professionalism and that underpinning values of commitment to students can be held by all groups, including managers.

Conclusion

Our review has painted a picture of a complex and continuous process of structural and political change that has revolutionised the role of college leaders in Scotland. Similarly, the proliferation of new constituencies of learners presents new challenges for managers and leaders. Each change has introduced tensions into the community of staff and students in a college and has created new and sometimes problematic relationships with external stakeholders. Equally these developments have created immense opportunities for Scottish colleges to emerge fully from their 'Cinderella' image and take centre stage both as providers of lifelong learning and as businesses in their own right.

Public and political interest in moving towards 'world-class' institutions creates a context for a new definition of the professional role of college principals and senior managers. Our review of the development of management and leadership practice within the historical context of public sector reform and aspects of the theory of professionalism leads us to propose that professionalism in college

management should, in future, be defined in terms of four distinct, but interrelated, dimensions. First, following incorporation, managers certainly need competence in the functional skills and disciplines appropriate for a complex organisation operating in both the public and private domains. Business skills such as financial control, estates management and public relations are now routine tools of the trade, not indicators of a negative managerialist ideology and, despite the few high-profile crises mentioned in our introduction, evidence suggests that the majority of colleges are competently managed (see SFC, 2006b). Second, principals need transformational leadership skills and the capacity to develop their organisations as complex systems able to adapt to an external context of change that presents both opportunities and threats. Third, the central role of colleges in lifelong learning means that senior managers must be able to play an explicit and informed role in both influencing and implementing educational policy. This requires both individual and collective effort and an ability to balance sectoral advantage with institutional diversity. To date, these three dimensions have clearly influenced the professional development agenda taken forward by Scotland's Colleges (ASC, 2003, 2007; SFEU, 2007).

Fourth, we suggest that the concept of professionalism should be embraced. This particularly emphasises the ability to create an institutional culture which locates management, not above and in isolation from other staff, but as part of a network of professional expertise with shared values. We envisage that at its core should be a renewed focus upon the complexity of the needs and expectations of lifelong learners. Progress towards a deeper understanding of the values of negotiation, collaboration and partnership among students, staff and stakeholders to underpin a learner-centred culture will drive new developments in professional practice for all staff. It is this shift in focus from managing an institution to facilitating the creation and operation of a value-based learning environment which is crucial to a new definition of the profession of college management.

The comprehensive redefinition that we have presented above represents a considerable and sharp contrast with the older public service ethic and with the simple rhetoric of managerialism. Various initiatives are likely to ensure that management development continues to be available for the college sector to promote progress towards 'world-class' leadership and management of institutions. An equally pressing challenge is for college leaders to develop a deeper understanding of their professional practice in terms of the values that sustain their institutions and a sophisticated capacity to forge new relationships among other professional groups and stakeholders to enhance a collective ability to provide effective lifelong learning.⁵

Notes

1. The Scottish Further and Higher Education Funding Council (SFHEFC), commonly known as the Scottish Funding Council (SFC), was established on 1 October 2005. Prior to this date its functions were exercised by the Scottish Higher Education

Funding Council (SHEFC) and the Scottish Further Education Funding Council (SFEFC).

2. Principal is the usual title for the post of head of a college in Scotland.
3. Scotland's Colleges was formed in 2009 as the collective body for the college sector in Scotland. It incorporates the former Association of Scottish Colleges (ASC) and the former Scottish Further Education Unit (SFEU).
4. We are aware of Mackie & Williamson's recent article on New Public Management (Mackie & Williamson, 2007). However, we have concerns regarding their account of Scottish further education since the late 1990s. We suspect that their account may misrepresent current management perspectives in colleges.
5. An extended version of this article may be found at: http://www.staff.stir.ac.uk/vernon.gayle/documents/lowe_gayle_2010_wp_v1.pdf.

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